

PEACE

BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE GULF STATES



Commentary by David M. Weinberg

How do the Emiratis and Bahrainis view Israel, and how do they see themselves? Can moderate and mature Gulf Arab thinking be exported to other parts of the Arab world? Why isn't the political left celebrating the Abraham Accords?

Introduction

Since the “Abraham Accords” were unveiled in August and then signed in September 2020, I have published six op-ed columns with analysis of the dramatic developments. These columns are reprinted below.

The latter three columns are based on extensive conversations with Emirati intellectuals and community leaders during a week-long visit to Dubai in December.

Among the issues I deal with are: Why isn't the political left celebrating the historic achievement of peace between Israel and the Gulf states? Why is Israel allowing the Palestinian-controlled Wakf to turn the Temple Mount into a base of hostile operations against Israelis and anybody (like Gulf Arabs) who make peace with Israel? How do the Emiratis view Israel (and what should Israelis learn from that)? How do Emiratis and Bahrainis see themselves and role of Islam in the modern world? And how can the Gulf model of moderate and mature thinking be exported to other parts of the Arab world, especially the Palestinians?

(Other columns of mine over this time have dealt with the Iranian threat; Trump and Biden administration Mideast policy; antisemitism; Israel's handling of the corona crisis; the deaths of Dr. Michael Levenstein, Rabbi Dr. Lord Jonathan Sacks, and *lehavdil*, Saeb Erekat; and more. See www.davidmweinberg.com).

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Sourpuss about peace

The left can't acknowledge Netanyahu's historic achievement of peace with the Gulf states.

Published in [The Jerusalem Post](#), September 18, 2020; and [Israel Hayom](#), September 21, 2020.

Party-poopers on the Israeli left and sourpusses on the left-wing of Diaspora Jewry were out in full force last week, pouring cold water on the peace accords signed between Israel and two Gulf states: The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

These killjoys found it hard to say anything positive about the exciting developments. Instead, they took a curmudgeon approach, even attaching sinister intentions to Prime Minister Netanyahu's great diplomatic achievement.

The left's crabby criticism of the agreement with the Gulf states begins with the argument that it is not really peace! *Haaretz* crankily noted that Israel hasn't fought a war with an Arab country in nearly 40 years, and never with the UAE and Bahrain – so what's all the pomp and ceremony about? The naysayers bay that Netanyahu is trumpeting a mythological "peace for peace" while "pretending that the conflict is an Arab-Israeli one.

As if the UAE's warm peace with Israel with real cooperative ties in dozens of fields isn't a historic breakthrough! As if the left wouldn't have feted a UAE peace deal with fireworks, street parades and Nobel prizes had it been brokered by Benny Gantz or Yair Lapid.

The second wet blanket thrown by Netanyahu's faultfinders is about the latter's "detachment" from the grim coronavirus lockdown situation that Israelis are facing. Critics griped that Netanyahu flew-off to party in Washington with his wife and boys ("the royal family," sic.) while citizens were frantically stockpiling for three weeks of curfew and business owners were fast spiraling towards bankruptcy!

The fact that this is the first time in eight months that Netanyahu has left the country (and only for two days, and for a major world event). This didn't prevent these bellyachers from accusing Netanyahu of rushing to America in order to divert attention from his "historic mishandling" of the pandemic.

Thirdly, the left alleged that the Gulf peace deals were reached "underhandedly." Maybe there is even something sordid in them, hinted several columnists. It is a sign of Netanyahu's authoritarian rule, they wrote, that the Knesset did not have the chance to review in advance the texts of the accords!

Of course, now that the texts of the accords have been published in every global newspaper, there is no sleaze to be found; and the Knesset will have an opportunity to ratify the accords next week – just as it did (after the fact) with the Egyptian and Jordanian peace treaties.

The oh-so-sore Chemi Shalev in *Haaretz* went one step further, accusing the "two unscrupulous scoundrels Trump and Netanyahu of collaborating with two of the world's most repressive regimes" to fashion "a Trojan horse harboring sinister designs." Shalev superciliously wrote that

“this veritable rogues’ gallery of political leaders desperately seeks to divert attention from their glaring failures at home.” And then he called their peace a “peace of the knaves.”

As if the US and the EU haven’t signed (far more dangerous) diplomatic accords with the genocidal Islamic Republic of Iran. As if Israel’s peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan were signed by democratic Arab leaders. As if the peace with the Palestinians that Shalev and his progressive buddies want would be signed by Palestinian Authority paragons of democracy and human rights.

Shalev even has the temerity to allege that Netanyahu may be “angling for a personal cut” of the Gulf riches that are expected to flow Israel’s way, given his supposed role in opening the door to US F-35 sales to the UAE. After all, Shalev snidely reminds us, the allegations of Netanyahu’s involvement in the corrupt German submarine deal have not been properly investigated.

The rockets launched by Palestinian terrorists in Gaza on Ashdod and Ashkelon at the exact moment Netanyahu was signing the “Abraham Accords” on the White House lawn also served Netanyahu’s critics well. The television news broadcasts switched to a split-screen in order ensure that no viewer could revel in the peace festivities without seeing enemy missiles striking Israeli civilians.

Of course, four Israelis were killed by PLO terrorists on the day that the Oslo Accords were signed on the White House lawn, but at that time the Israeli media hardly made a mention of it. It would not have been nice to rain on Yitzhak Rabin’s and Shimon Peres’ parade. Dumping on Netanyahu is another matter all-together. It is an automatic media reflex.

Which brings us to the core problem felt by the Israeli and American Jewish left regarding the Gulf state peace accords; that the accords distract from the “urgent need” to give the Palestinians a state of their own.

J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami wailed that the Abraham Accords cannot be a substitute for diplomacy with his beloved and peaceful Palestinians. The New Israel Fund hiccupped that “while peace agreements are always to be celebrated, Israelis must still make a choice between ending the occupation or continuing to maintain an unjust system where Palestinians are both separate and unequal.” IfNotNow barked that the accords “are simply Trump and Netanyahu’s latest sleight of hand,” meant to “keep the Palestinian as political pawns.”

As if Israel’s peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt two and three decades ago ended conflict with the Palestinians! As if those accords hadn’t nonetheless provided enormous strategic value for Israel, by strengthening it and normalizing its international standing. As if the new accords with the Gulf states shouldn’t be judged on the same standards.

ALL THIS NASTY nattering reflects the deeply partisan climate in both America and Israel. Alas, neither Trump nor Netanyahu can do any good in the eyes of their political opponents.

The political left can’t stand the fact that the peace accords are a personal success and a diplomatic vindication for Netanyahu, who for years has argued that only a strong and successful Israel will bring peace; not an Israel that bows its head and begs for peace at any price.

The political left can't stand the fact that for all Trump's prejudices and shenanigans, his team set clear goals in Mideast peacemaking and brought about concrete results.

The political left can't stand the fact that their darling underdog Palestinians have been exposed as one of the most intransigent, rejectionist, antisemitic and anti-American actors in the Middle East – aligned with Iran, Turkey and every other radical Islamist group in the region.

The left can't stand that Jared Kushner has proven that the Palestinian cause is no longer the "crux" of Middle East conflict; and that all the billions poured down the Palestinian Authority drain indeed may have been a mistake.

Less partisan and more reasonable pundits should be able to agree that the Abraham Accords are a gargantuan gain for everyone involved.

They expand and solidify a critical regional alliance against a dangerous common enemy: Iran.

They break the circle of enmity around Israel, and perhaps have done so more already than the Egyptian and Jordanian accords ever did.

They lend religious legitimacy to Arab peace with Israel, by referencing the Abrahamic common heritage of Arabs and Jews, and thus implicitly acknowledging that Jews are indigenous to the Land of Israel. This is a mammoth transformation in the Arab approach to Israel.

The accords are demonstrable proof that Israel is a force for good, knowledge, prosperity, and stability in the Middle East. After all, that is the reason the UAE and Bahrain (and hopefully soon other Arab states) are bandwagoning with Israel.

Nothing less than full-throated celebration is called for.

The “Sand Curtain” has fallen

The Sand Curtain between Israel and the Arab world has fallen, like the Iron Curtain 30 years ago, but some of the world has difficulty rejoicing in the breakthrough. The Left assiduously is poking holes in the Abraham Accords and making sourpuss faces whenever the Roadrunner-fast advances in Gulf-Israel ties are mentioned.

Published in [The Jerusalem Post](#), November 20, 2020; and [Israel Hayom](#), November 22, 2020.

The speed with which Israeli ties to the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have taken off, and the genuine warmth experienced by every Israeli business delegation and tourist group in these countries, is astounding. It is a lightening peace bonanza, a whirlwind of almost Biblical proportions.

The American, Israeli, and Bahraini foreign ministers embraced each other in Jerusalem this week like they were old friends. High-level American diplomatic efforts could soon bring Morocco, Niger, Oman, and Saudi Arabia to the party too.

Three Emirati and three Israeli airlines will be operating daily flights to Dubai and Abu Dhabi by March. (Israir alone has sold 2,000 tickets for the coming month). The Emirati flights from Ben-Gurion Airport will be timed to connect with Emirates flights from the Gulf to the Far East, giving Israelis new routes to China, Japan, Thailand and more.

Venture capitalists from Tel Aviv and Dubai are scouting-out joint investment opportunities in cybersecurity, fintech, aggrotech, food security, educational technology, and healthcare. Bilateral business chambers have been established, including a Jewish-Moslem women’s business council and a youth council. As one Emirati investment house executive enthused to *The New York Times*, “It’s like falling in love!”

Academics from the Emirates and Israel are participating in each other’s conferences. Israel’s two main strategic think tanks, INSS and JISS, each have signed research partnerships with leading Emirati institutes. Tourist packages for Israelis and for Jews everywhere to the Gulf are sprouting like mushrooms, and the Emirati tourists to Israel are coming soon too. These are the beginnings of real people-to-people engagement; something that Israel has never enjoyed with the publics in Egypt or Jordan.

The “Sand Curtain,” like the Iron Curtain 30 years ago, has fallen.

It is impossible to deny that this fantastic new Mideast dynamic strengthens Israeli and Western strategic interests, while weakening Iran, Turkey, Russia, China, and the radicals among Palestinians.

It is further impossible to ignore that a dazzling new religious reconciliation discourse has been triggered by the “Abraham Accords”; a discourse that accords religious legitimacy to Arab peace with Israel.

By explicitly referencing the Abrahamic common heritage of Moslems and Jews in the foundational document of this revolution (deliberately named the “Abraham Accords”), the peace accords implicitly acknowledge that Jews are a Biblical people indigenous to the Land of Israel. This is a blunt rejection of the ongoing Palestinian campaign to deny and criminalize the Jewish People’s historic rights in Israel.

UNFORTUNATELY, some around the world remain begrudging in their embrace of these blessed developments.

For the extreme left, it is hard to swallow that the fact that Israel is demonstrably a force for good, knowledge, prosperity, and stability in the Middle East. After all, that is the reason the UAE and Bahrain are bandwagoning around Israel!

Second, the left is reluctant to give credit to Donald Trump or Binyamin Netanyahu for anything, even when the result is obviously so beneficial.

Third, the left and center-left, including the incoming Biden administration, wishes to reinstate the disastrously weak JCPOA deal with Iran; a deal that Israel and its Gulf partners were, and remain, adamantly opposed to.

In fact, a common front against the hegemonic designs of Iran is the glue that underlies Israel-Gulf relations. As a result, the Biden administration and its European partners are going to face stiff opposition from Gulf and Israeli leaders if/when Biden & Co. broach another softie deal with Iran.

Fourth, some are uncomfortable with the renewed “religious” discourse about Biblical patrimony and rights, as described above. To leftist ears, this smacks of Evangelical Christian and right-wing Orthodox Jewish standpoints. The only type of “rights” they are comfortable with are the liberal, politically-correct, intersectional kind – in which Palestinian rights are paramount.

Fifth, it certainly upsets the left that the accords sideline the Palestinians. Their struggle is no longer the “crux” of Middle East conflict. At the very least, the Sunni states partnering with Israel question whether there is an “urgent need” or sufficient justification to give the Palestinians a state of their own.

For all these reasons, the Left assiduously has been poking holes in the Abraham Accords and making sourpuss faces whenever the Roadrunner-fast advances in Gulf-Israel ties are mentioned.

One way of doing this is giving a cold shoulder to US and Israeli allies in the region like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, because of their human rights abuses. For example, Biden’s top foreign policy advisor Tony Blinken speaks of “reassessing” US ties to Riyadh to punish Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul.

He also talks of pressuring the autocratic government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Cairo, without regard for the very bad (Moslem Brotherhood) alternatives to his regime. (Sisi has proven to be Israel’s best Egyptian ally since the days of Anwar Sadat).

Another method of souring the Abraham Accords environment is to manufacture flashpoints between the US and Israel, like this week’s ridiculous controversy about developing the Givat

HaMatos neighborhood in southern Jerusalem. For the “Palestine Firsters,” like the EU, UN and Peace Now, Givat HaMatos has become a “settlement” whose development will “kill the two-state solution.” (Utter nonsense!)

Again, this matter is being passionately and purposefully puffed-up to put an acerbic edge on Biden-Netanyahu relations; and to curdle the sweet cream of Gulf-Israel relations.

Instead of acting to taint the Abraham Accords ecosystem, the left ought to be working to convince their Palestinian brethren that a durable peace with Israel is now possible, with broad Arab backing.

Instead of letting the Palestinian Authority get away with violent, and radical moves like issuing a *fatwa* (religious decree) banning Emirati Moslems from visiting or praying on the Temple Mount (!), the left should be pressing the PA to cut its ties with Hamas, Iran, and radical Islamist Turkey; and to welcome the role that the UAE and Bahrain can play in an expanded peace process.

The left should be pressing PA president-for-life Mahmoud Abbas to cease his rabid anti-Israel rhetoric, and dial-down his expectations. There will be no reverting to stale and unworkable formulas based on maximalist Palestinian demands (and minimalist regard for Israeli security needs and national-historic claims).

I am referring, of course, to discredited formulas involving the uprooting of settlements, Israeli withdrawals from most of Judea and Samaria, and a division of Jerusalem. That ain't going to happen, no matter how fiercely Abbas attacks Israel in international forums or how impolitely President Biden presses Israel – to left-wing applause.

Defend the Temple Mount for Jews and Moslems alike

The Emiratis and Bahrainis are paying the price for Israeli government malfeasance in handling Har HaBayit, the Temple Mount. The Wakf has been allowed to run wild, turning the holy site a base of hostile operations against Israelis, and now also against anybody who makes peace with Israel.

Published in [The Jerusalem Post](#), December 4, 2020; and [Israel Hayom](#), December 7, 2020.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is likely to visit the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain later this month, following the signing several months ago of peace accords with these two Gulf countries. Surely, he will be warmly welcomed.

But ask yourselves: Why are there no plans in the works for a visit to Israel by the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, or the King of Bahrain, Hamad Al Khalifa? Wouldn't they be warmly welcomed here too?

Indeed, these brave Arab leaders undoubtedly would be feted in Israel, both in the business orbits of Tel Aviv and the national halls of power in Jerusalem.

But there is an island of extra-territorial land in Jerusalem, very central to a visit of any major Arab leader, where the Gulf monarchs will not be welcomed. Just the opposite is true. They will be attacked. The imams at this site will rally against them, even exhorting the masses to riot in protest of the visiting monarchs.

I am certain that the embarrassment and trouble that a senior Emirati or Bahraini visit to this site would cause is one of the major reasons that no such visit is currently being planned.

I am referring, of course, to the Temple Mount, which formally is under Israeli administration and diplomatically under Jordanian patronage, but in reality, is controlled and dominated by the Palestinian Authority through the radical Islamic trust called the Wakf.

The Palestinians and their Wakf are furious about the new peace treaties signed by these Gulf states and Israel, and have made it clear that Emiratis and Bahrainis are not welcome to pray in Al-Aqsa Mosque on the al-Haram Al-Sharif.

As if the Palestinians own this site and have the right to deny prayer there to any Moslem that does not dance to their tune. As if the Wakf has the right to decide who sanctifies and who "desecrates" Al-Aqsa by their political perspective. As if the Palestinian Authority has the prerogative to order the stoning of Arab pilgrims at the site or their shaming by throwing shoes and blood-curdling epithets at them.

Alas, this is exactly what happened recently when Emirati and Bahraini delegations ascended the Temple Mount to pray there. The visitors were forced to enter the compound under Israeli police protection as Wakf ruffians chanted slogans denouncing them as "Zionist stormtroopers and settlers" who were "violating the sanctity" of the mosques.

Shadi Mtour, a Fatah leader in eastern Jerusalem, told reporters that “any (Arab) delegation visiting Jerusalem through the gates of the occupation is not welcome.” Other Palestinians demanded that the “contaminated carpets” where the Gulfies prayed be replaced.

Last Friday, Bahraini visitors to Israel led by Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, a representative of the Bahraini monarch, prayed at al-Aqsa without stating their nationality out of fear that they would be thrown out of the site. “If we had told them where we were from, they would have prevented us from going up,” al-Khalifa told IDF Radio.

Al-Khalifa, who heads the King Hamad Global Center for Peaceful Coexistence, was furious. “Al Aqsa is not just for the Palestinians. It belongs to the entire Muslim world. It is inconceivable that they tell someone, ‘You normalized with Israel: You won’t pray in Jerusalem.’ This is a new form of (Palestinian) terror.”

Nevertheless, the Palestinian Authority mufti of Jerusalem, Sheikh Mohammed Hussein, issued a *fatwa* (Islamic ruling) banning Muslims from praying at al-Aqsa Mosque within the framework of normalization agreements between Israel and Arab countries.

UNFORTUNATELY, the Palestinians learned their *chutzpah* (insolent audacity) on the Temple Mount on the backs of Jews and Israelis. They have turned the Temple Mount into a base of hostile operations against Jews and Israelis, instead of protecting it as zone of prayer and peace.

Wakf and Islamic movement provocateurs regularly attack Jewish visitors to the Mount. They even have attacked Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall below the Mount.

They have restricted visitation rights to the holy Mount for all non-Moslems; have hijacked the pulpits in the mosque on the Mount to preach hatred and violence against Israel; have purveyed a canard about the Al-Aqsa mosque being under attack from Israel to rile up the Palestinian public and broader Islamic world; and have conducted vast and illegal construction projects on the Mount and underneath it, willfully destroying centuries of Jewish archaeological treasures.

In fact, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas continues to roil the waters and foment violence against Israel by repeating the canard that “Al-Aqsa is in danger.” He continues to stoke a broad-scale campaign against the authenticity of Israel’s historic rights in Jerusalem.

In September 2015 he screeched about “filthy” Jewish feet that were “desecrating” holy Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem. “Al-Aqsa is ours and so is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher,” he bellowed. “They (the Jews) have no right to desecrate them with their filthy feet. We won’t allow them to do so and we will do whatever we can to defend Jerusalem.”

Abbas then fulminated about (false) Jewish threats to the mosques on the Mount, and praised the *mourabitoun* (Islamic gangs posted on the Mount to accost non-Moslem visitors). “Each drop of blood that was spilled in Jerusalem is pure blood as long as it’s for the sake of Allah. Every *shahid* (martyr) will be in heaven and every wounded person will be rewarded, by Allah’s will.”

It should be noted that Abbas revs-up tensions around the Temple Mount every summer, in advance of his appearances at the UN General Assembly; a cynical and desperate ploy aimed at

gaining global attention. His ambassadors have repeatedly brought resolutions to international forums such as UNESCO that deny Jewish history and rights in Jerusalem and Hebron.

I PLACE THE ultimate responsibility, and blame, for the deteriorating situation in and around the Temple Mount on the Israeli government.

Jerusalem always prefers to “quiet” things down and “restore calm.” It chooses to maintain a situation whereby the Palestinians exercise exclusive religious and national rights on the Mount and have rigged the site as a base of attack, while Jews have only limited visitation rights on Har HaBayit and are forbidden from praying there.

Now the Emiratis and Bahrainis are paying the price too for that Israeli government malfeasance.

The Netanyahu-Gantz government would enjoy widespread public backing for action to parry Palestinian and Islamic incitement in Jerusalem and to solidify Israel’s rights on Har HaBayit. Pan-Arab rights too. Only a forward-looking and affirmative Israeli stance can create a new situation of just compromise on the Temple Mount.

What Dubai taught me about Israel

A Chanukah-week trip to Dubai taught me that Israel and Jews are admired when they are strong and believing. Emiratis respect Israelis for their loyalty to ancient heritage and for their belief in the power of Jewish history. Believe it or not, the Emiratis seem to understand – perhaps better than we do ourselves, sometimes – that these anchors of identity are the greatest source of strength and authenticity.

Published in [The Jerusalem Post](#), December 18, 2020; [Israel Hayom](#), December 23, 2020; and the [Jewish News Syndicate](#) (JNS), December 24, 2020.

In my wildest dreams, I never imagined lighting a full menorah on the eighth day of Chanukah in the United Arab Emirates. Nor had I contemplated saying *kaddish* for my father on his 14th *yahrtzeit*, last week, in the desert dunes on the periphery of Dubai. (My father would have been amused and excited about both moments, I think.)

And yet, there I was in an Arab country, newly at peace with Israel, on Chanukah – the holiday of Jewish spiritual resistance and military victory. Amazingly, there was no reason to hide my Jewish religious affiliation or my national citizenship as an Israeli. Just the opposite was true. Everyone in Dubai was thrilled to meet a religious Jew and a real Israeli. Emiratis are proud to be associated with us.

(I was in the United Arab Emirates to teach Torah and strategic affairs on behalf of [koshertravelers.com](#), for visiting Jews from around the world. Last week, there was more Hebrew than Arabic heard in the streets of Dubai!)

To tell you the truth, at first, I was put off by the seemingly preening skyscrapers of modern Dubai. Every guide boasts that the Burj Khalifa is the tallest building in the world. Which reminds me of the Tower of Babel, of which G-d did not approve. “And they said: ‘Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, with its top in heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’” (Genesis 11:4). And indeed, G-d then scattered mankind upon the whole face of the earth, to curb the arrogance.

But then I learned from Emiratis to see their tall towers differently. They do not mean to lord it over others or express conceit. They mean to say: We are a forward-looking nation.

They mean to say: We are secure in our heritage and confident about our abilities to contribute to the world. We are big, powerful, and wealthy enough to be educated, generous and tolerant.

The Emiratis do not bemoan colonialism in their past. They do not wail about anti-Arab discrimination, nor do they blame others or seek scapegoats.

For an Israeli, this is so refreshing! Alas, so many Arab countries keep their people in the dark ages, and wallow in negativity. We have gotten used to nothing but self-pity and bitterness from many of Israel's Arab neighbors, along with complaints, false allegations, vituperation, and other attacks against Israel.

The Emiratis see no need to buy into anti-Jewish conspiracy theories like "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," or nefarious tales about Jerusalem controlling Washington. Again, just the opposite is true. They believe in hard work and in using one's riches (be they intellectual riches or oil riches) for the betterment of one's own people. In this perspective, cooperation with Israel is a win-win situation for the Emiratis.

Of course, the Emiratis do not have a border dispute with Israel, and they have enough money to both help the Palestinians move into the 21st century (if the Palestinians are willing to be helped) and to invest together with Israel in technologies and educational ventures that drive towards the 22nd century.

Nevertheless, the Emirati perspective is clear and edifying: They see Israel as a force for good in the world.

In attempting to drill down into the Emirati mind as to why they see Israel so, I discovered that this goes way beyond Israel's economic and technological success, and even beyond Israel's military prowess.

It is certainly true that Emiratis respect Israel's strength. Not only has Israel shown the grit and resilience to overcome the big armies of yesteryear – the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq – but it is the only country in the world fighting Iranian troops on the ground and repelling the Iranian drive for regional hegemony. The IDF and the Mossad are battling the armies, the Shiite militias, and the Revolutionary Guards of Iran, in Lebanon and Syria, and reportedly in Iraq and Iran, and probably elsewhere too.

Thus, the Emiratis see Israelis as "Maccabees" of old, fighting valiantly for their homeland; as a minority beating majority forces of evil. Just like it says in the *Al HaNissim* prayer for Chanukah: *Rabim beyad me'atim*: "The Almighty delivered the mighty in the hands of the weak," as it were.

But there is more. As I read them, the Emiratis also respect Israelis for their faithfulness to Jewish tradition, for their belief in the power of Jewish history, for their loyalty to ancient heritage and unique national identity. Believe it or not, the Emiratis seem to understand – perhaps better than we do ourselves, sometimes – that these anchors of identity are the greatest source of strength and authenticity.

Indeed, the Emiratis see themselves similarly: As a people and a country that successfully blends ancient tradition, culture and ethnic identity with modern progress and ambition.

This reminds me of a central theme taught by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of recent blessed memory. He was absolutely convinced that non-Jews most respect Jews who are self-respecting.

He meant that Jews who are knowledgeable of Judaism, proud to carry its banners, and conspicuous about doing so, gain the admiration of non-Jews. On the other hand, ambivalent, embarrassed, and ignorant Jews elicit scorn or worse, in addition to condemning themselves to identity oblivion.

I see that the same principle applies to Zionist belief and the defense of Israel. Non-Jews most respect Jews who are unapologetically self-respecting in their Zionism; and see in their Zionism an opportunity for the Jewish People from the Land of Israel to contribute to the world.

It is ironic and thrilling at the same time, that it took a week in Dubai (of all places!) on Chanukah (of all Jewish holidays!) to remind me of this truism: That Israel is admired when it is strong and believing.

Is peace with the Gulf states real? Yes, it is.

Emirati pursuit of peace with Israel is backed by a genuine discourse of religious moderation and broad-mindedness.

Published in [The Jerusalem Post](#), January 1, 2021; [Israel Hayom](#) and [JNS](#), January 3, 2021.

Judging from responses to my article two weeks ago about a recent visit to the United Arab Emirates, many Israelis remain skeptical about the discourse of peace and tolerance I discovered in Dubai.

Alas, Israelis have been conditioned to hear only bitterness from Israel's Arab neighbors; a narrative of self-pity and anger marked by complaints, false allegations, vituperation, and glorification of violence against Israel.

Nevertheless, I am persuaded that the Emirati pursuit of peace with Israel is genuine. It is backed by a discourse of religious moderation and broad-mindedness that is deep and admirable. And incredibly hopeful.

For those who already may be rolling their eyes in disbelief, I declare up front that I never have been an acolyte of the Shimon Peres school of diplomacy; misty-eyed, kumbaya-inflected, naïve and dangerous thinking about peace in the Middle East. Nor do I subscribe to Peace Now's faith in the Palestinians as a reliable partner for Israel in guaranteeing peace and security west of the Jordan river.

But the Emiratis *are* different. They are a distinctive type of Arab Moslem. They want to redefine the self-identity and global image of Arab Moslems in a way that blends enlightenment with tradition. Affiliating with Israel fits perfectly into this agenda, aside from the security and economic benefits that will devolve from UAE-Israel partnership.

Indeed, the Emiratis see themselves as a people and a country that successfully blends ancient tradition, culture and ethnic identity with modern progress and ambition. (That, by the way, is how they view Jews and Israel too.)

Allow me to summarize almost verbatim what I heard from Emirati intellectuals and community leaders over a week in the UAE.

THE CORE PROBLEM in the Middle East, say Emiratis, is that religious hatred has become the main political currency, a very volatile and hypocritically exploited currency. Iran invests heavily in religious hatred; hatred of Israel, of America and the West, and of other Moslems who don't hew to the radical Shiite line. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps relies on religious hatred to mobilize young men to its ranks. So do Turkey and the Moslem Brotherhood, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda.

The Abraham Accords are meant “to take religious hatred out of the equation,” and move Israel-Arab ties to the level of normal state-to-state relations, hopefully setting an example for other Arab countries in the region. “We must end the zero-sum game of killing and conquering. We must change the political topography of the region and use peace to bring about a tectonic shift in the Middle East.”

In fact, the only way to stabilize the many areas of conflict throughout the Middle East, say the Emiratis, is to make “normal life” the central pursuit of all Arab governments. I was told, for example, that it is a “normal thing” to have a choice of fruits and vegetables from India, or from Israel, in Emirati grocery stores.

More importantly, normal family life revolves around school schedules and the quality of education. And this is where the Emiratis are regional revolutionaries. At the directive of Emirati leadership, for almost two decades schools have taught religious and ethnic tolerance, and the value of scientific and critical humanistic thinking.

Therefore, Emiratis speak excellent English, study voraciously at the best universities abroad, embrace all the latest technologies in developing their country, host some 200 nationalities as expatriate businessmen and infrastructure workers in the UAE, and speak the language of multiculturalism and non-discrimination.

It is, apparently, why every Emirati businessman and cultural figure I met, said: “We have been waiting for so long for an above-the-table relationship with Israel.”

The Emiratis see themselves and other Sunni Arabs as “victims of decades of media brainwashing” in support of “narrow” (meaning, radical Islamic) agendas and “immature” (meaning, Palestinian) thinking. These deleterious discourses always need an “enemy” to hate.

“But hatred is not from God. It does not flow from logic. And hatred is not the future,” a very senior Emirati who is close to UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed told me.

The Emiratis “have learned over the course of time” that boycotting Israel “makes no sense,” since Israel is clearly a force for stability and an engine for prosperity in the region. The Emiratis have “matured,” unfortunately the Palestinians have not, and the Emiratis “cannot wait endlessly for the Palestinians to do so.”

Israeli-Palestinian peace is necessary, but it must be a “sustainable peace,” meaning that a two-state solution is not necessarily the best option, and the contours of a settlement “can’t fluctuate from one (US) administration to another.”

Furthermore, any future Israeli-Palestinian deal “will have to take broader Arab state considerations into account” – and this no longer means that Gulf Arabs necessarily will support

maximum Palestinian demands. “The Palestinians need peace with Israel more than Israel needs peace with the Palestinians. They should remember this in Ramallah and Gaza.”

Emiratis are not impressed by the term “Judeo-Christian values,” and they are quick to point out that in the 21st century a clearly identifiable (Orthodox) Jew can walk the streets of Dubai or Doha in much more safety and comfort than he/she can walk the streets of Berlin, London, Paris, or New York.

The Emiratis prefer to speak of “Abrahamic Family values,” which are less religiously divisive and more inclusive. Of course, this “Abrahamic narrative” also is meant to challenge the anti-Western and anti-Israeli agenda of Islamist extremists, as well as the mainly European and Christian hard right which sees all Moslems as inherently anti-Western, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, and all-together threatening.

One Emirati intellectual I met is creatively rethinking the visions that Moslems and Jews have about Abraham and other Biblical figures like Moses. He wants us to think of Abraham not (only) as a tenacious smasher of idols, but as “a yuppy, a son of a billionaire in Ur of the Chaldees, who today would be teaching tolerance and Divine love with five laptops, a dozen iPhones, and people of all religions and nationalities in his class.”

He wants us to think of Moses not (only) as a shepherd in sandals chasing sheep across the desert, but as “a broad, brave leader who stood up to Pharaoh and all other bigoted orthodoxies of his time, and who emphasized broad education, self-refinement, and nation-building.”

EMIRATIS EMPHASIZE that there are many misconceptions about Israel that still need to be overcome, even among educated Arabs. For example, many of them believe a myth that the two stripes on Israel’s flag represent two rivers. This is supposedly an expression of Zionist imperialist ambition to rule the region from the Nile river to the Euphrates river, as God promised Abraham.

Of course, this is nonsense. But none of the people I spoke to, knew that the stripes on Israel’s flag are taken from the Jewish prayer shawl (*tallit*). None knew the stripes relate to the ritual fringes (*tzitzit*) on the prayer shawl, as well as to the halachic obligation to distinguish light from darkness before reciting the morning *Shema* prayer. And no Emirati knew about kabbalistic emanations of Divine grace – dark stripes of God’s judgement (*gevura*) on a white background of God’s benevolence (*chessed*).

Similarly, Emiratis fear that Israel’s self-definition as a “Jewish state” is discriminatory, meaning that only Jews can become citizens – which is not the case. (Yes, I am aware how odd it is to hear this complaint from Emiratis, who refuse to give citizenship to any Arab or Westerner who isn’t from core Emirati stock!)

In overall perspective, the Emiratis are pluralists when considering Israel’s place in the region. Many of them even are willing to say openly (when asked about this) that Jews and Israelis should

be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and that prayer rights there should be extended to Christians too if they so wish.

One prominent Emirati cultural figure, who is close to Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the vice president and prime minister of the UAE and the ruler of Dubai, told me: "There is no reason why the plaza at Haram al-Sharif can't be expanded to facilitate the prayer of other faiths. Islam is not meant to deny others their deep connections to God."

Can the “Abrahamic narrative” grow beyond the Gulf states?

Three ways in which the Emiratis and Bahrainis (and perhaps soon the Saudis) can bring about a slow but sea change in Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian (and Egyptian and Jordanian) attitudes towards Israel.

Published in the [Israel Gulf Report](#), January 4, 2021; [Israel Hayom](#), January 5, 2020.

The speed with which Israeli ties to the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have taken off, and the warmth experienced by every Israeli business delegation and tourist group in these countries, is astounding.

One explanation for this alacrity is that the normalization of ties between these Gulf Arabs and Israelis partially is based on something deeper than security and economic relations. From the Gulf side, it is based on a genuine discourse of religious moderation and broad-mindedness.

The Emiratis and Bahrainis explicitly want to set an example for other Arab countries in the region. The question is whether their models of moderate and mature thinking indeed can be exported to other parts of the Arab world? Can it catch on elsewhere?

In fact, every Israeli to whom I have related my conversations and experiences in the Gulf has asked me this very question. They say: Let’s assume we believe you, and stipulate that some the Gulf Arabs are genuine in their pursuit of peace and partnership with Israel, based on a self-conception that prioritizes open-mindedness and non-discrimination. But how are Gulf Arab leaders going to influence the Palestinians, or the Egyptians and Jordanians?

After all, Israelis have been conditioned to hear only bitterness from Israel’s immediate Arab neighbors; a narrative of self-pity and anger marked by complaints, false allegations, vituperation, and in some cases, glorification of violence against Israel.

Some of these Arabs still maintain a border conflict with Israel; some are deeply embedded in a rejectionist narrative that denies the Jewish People’s historic and legitimate connection to Zion; and some openly seek Israel’s destruction!

So, what can the Emiratis and Bahrainis really do about changing attitudes among the Arab populations that sit on Israel’s borders?

IN MY VIEW, there are several ways in which the Emiratis and Bahrainis (and perhaps soon the Saudis) can bring about a slow but sea change in Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian (and Egyptian and Jordanian) attitudes towards Israel.

The first and most obvious thing that the Gulf states can do is succeed in developing their security and economic ties to Israel. The greater the concrete peace benefit for the Gulf states is seen to be, the more attractive peace with Israel will be for additional Arab actors.

Second, Gulf states can offer their school curriculums on religious and ethnic tolerance, and the value of scientific and critical humanistic thinking, to Arab schools across the Middle East. There is talk of launching an Emirati distance-learning program with high school and college courses available to Arab and Moslem students from Morocco to Iran. Over time, this educational export product could have real moderating impact.

Third, Gulf states can help dial-down unrealistic Palestinian expectations in advance of renewed peace negotiations with Israel. But this means talks based on pragmatic parameters, and with pared-back, not exaggerated, Palestinians expectations. Thus, Gulf diplomatic and financial support to the Palestinians in the context of possible new talks with Israel should be conditioned on levelheaded Palestinian thinking.

Gulf leaders already have indicated that any future Israeli-Palestinian deal “will have to take broader Arab state considerations into account” – and this no longer means that Gulf Arabs necessarily will support maximum Palestinian demands. “The Palestinians need peace with Israel more than Israel needs peace with the Palestinians. They should remember this in Ramallah and Gaza,” I was told by Emiratis on my recent visit to Dubai.

Israel-Palestinian peace must be a “sustainable peace,” say Emiratis. This means that a runaway “two-state solution” as promoted ad nauseum in successive international resolutions (involving a division of Jerusalem, total Israeli withdrawals from Judea and Samaria/the West Bank, and zero Palestinian Authority compliance with any of its peace commitments) – is not necessarily the only or best option. The alternative and undeniably more realistic Trump administration proposals of February 2020 ought to be considered as well.

One way of nurturing more mature Palestinian thinking is by changing Gulf state votes at the UN on a broad range of outrageous annual resolutions that condemn Israel for everything from poisoning the wells in Judea (sic.) to a 2006 oil spill along the Lebanese shore.

Other disgraceful resolutions affirm the Temple Mount as an exclusive Moslem site (denying Jewish history), and back a so-called Palestinian “right of refugee return” to Israel. (The “right” of return is political code for backing Israel’s destruction as a Jewish and democratic state by overwhelming it with Palestinians who have been held hostage by Arab states for decades).

A series of abstentions or no votes by Gulf states over the coming year on some of these unhelpful resolutions would go a long way towards forcing a Palestinian reckoning with reality.

Le Monde reported this week that Israel and the United Arab Emirates are working together to gradually eliminate the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) – a corrupt agency that has perpetuated and exacerbated, not helped to solve,

Palestinian refugee problems. UNRWA schools also have become incubators of hatred against Israel and even launching pads for rocket barrages against Israel.

Gulf state support for replacing UNRWA with other humanitarian funding routes would be another important signal to Palestinians that the time has come to truly end their conflict with Israel.

In sum, there are many ways in which Gulf Arab leaders can usefully seek to move the Palestinians (and Israel's other immediate Arab neighbors) towards moderation and maturity.

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